



Salmon catch off Alaska (Photo courtesy of Lt. Cmdr. Benjamin Miller)

THE DEADLIEST CATCH: A SURGEON'S JOURNEY FROM FISHERIES TO THE U.S. NAVY

By André B. Sobocinski

Historian, U.S. Navy Bureau of Medicine and Surgery

It had been a typical day aboard USS Bataan (LHD-5) when word rang out that casualties were inbound via MV-22.

Fleet Surgical Team (FST) No. 6, an 18-member mobile augmented readiness unit comprised of surgeons, trauma and ICU nurses, medical techs, a family doc and a psychiatrist, collectively provided Role 2 medical capabilities aboard the ship. Among them was a general surgeon named Lt. Cmdr. Benjamin T. Miller on his first deployment.

The FST immediately activated the ship's walking blood bank, and transfused 40 units of whole blood during the mass casualty incident.

For the next 30 hours, Miller and the FST performed a variety of procedures until stabilization was achieved and casualties were transferred to a medical facility ashore. All would survive.

This story is even more remarkable owing to the fact that only a few years earlier, Miller was executing a different type of sea-going mission as a fisherman off the Aleutian Peninsula.

Miller, a Minnesotan and an avowed outdoorsman, began working for fisheries in college.



One day at the school library Miller found a book listing the mailing addresses of different fisheries in Alaska.

"I had read that Bristol Bay was a gritty fishery where you had a decent chance to make some money so I sent letters out and the first skipper to respond had a wife who was from Minnesota," remembered Miller. "He offered me a job and I took it and I went up there blindly."

Miller with King Salmon in

Bristol Bay, Alaska. (Photo

courtesy of Lt. Cmdr.

Benjamin Miller)

Miller would work at the fishery for the next seven seasons. But all was not without some risk.

Viewers of the television program *Deadliest Catch* know that commercial fishing is a hazardous profession, which Miller would learn first-hand.

"One day after the wind had been blowing into the bay from the Bering Sea for several days, the seas were huge," related Miller. "The fishing was great that day because the wind had blown the salmon into Bristol Bay. We were pulling our gear onboard and picking fish out of the net, but we were so busy we didn't realize we had drifted too close to the beach. A giant breaking wave hit the side of our small [32-foot] boat and turned it on its side."

The wave picked Miller off the deck and would have thrown him overboard if it weren't for the quick thinking of a deckhand who grabbed the hood of his raingear pulling him back aboard. As rough as the water was, Miller believes to this day that had he gone overboard, they would never have found him.

Miller left commercial fishing in 2007 to complete his medical education. But in his third year of general surgery residency the sea came calling again, and Miller decided to pursue a career as a Navy surgeon.

Miller credits the support of his wife on his decision to enter the military, but it is his experience as a fisherman and love of the ocean that would lead him to serve in the Navy.

And as Miller explained, being a fisherman and a general surgeon in the Navy has more in common than one would expect.

"Fishing is obviously very different from surgery, but living and working on the ocean is similar for both Navy surgeons and commercial fishermen. It prepared me for the close quarters of shipboard life and the

mariner's long, idle hours. Fishing can also be exhausting work, a real grind, but it prepared me for the long hours during surgical residency and deployment as a Navy surgeon."